

# **Elections and Democratic Survival in the Fourth Republic of Nigeria**

by

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses elections and democratic survival in the Nigeria with specific focus on the Fourth Republic from the functional perspective of political parties. Thus, the paper through the use of elite theory unfolds the machinations and manipulations of political parties by the elites in such a way that political parties are elitist in operation and in the process of power acquisition which no doubt has negatively impacted on the electoral process both at the intra and inter party level. The paper therefore recommends that in order for the electoral system to be free and fair, there is need for government to place priority on education through free and compulsory education up to senior secondary school in order to enhance the quality of political participation because the present political parties are poorly structured to perform the functions of political socialization and communication. This is coupled with the need to establish an electoral crime commission that will serve as a watchdog on the players in the electoral system by making sure that they play according to the rules of the game.

## **Introduction**

Poor electoral process snowballing into legitimacy crisis is one of the major impediments of an enduring democracy in developing States. In Nigeria, the democratic process had been several times as a result of political topsy-turvy arising from poor electoral process among other. Although the factors that negatively impacted on the Nigerian electoral process are multifaceted, which ranges from ethnicity, lack of independence in the operative of the judiciary and the electoral body, poor political culture among others (Ibaba 2007; Omodia, 2007).

However, the main focus of this paper is to unfold the nature of elitist manipulation of political parties as key structure of the democratic political institution in undermining the system. This is no doubt indispensable considering the conception that functional political parties, especially in a multi-party system tend to enhance the quality of the democratic process in terms of democratic representation and political participation through effective political education that also enhances and provides functional support for the electoral process (Dinneya, 2006; Bello, 2008). In other words, it could be argued that a strong electoral process cum democracy exists when there is a strong party system which manifest the tenets of democracy both at the intra and inter party level. Thus, the need to discuss elections and democratic survival in the Nigerian Fourth Republic with focus on political parties as institution for democratic governance, and to achieve this objective, this paper is sectionalized to discuss a theoretical framework, elitism and elections in Nigeria, elections and democracy, the way forward for democratic survival, and the concluding remarks.

## **Theoretical Framework**

While it could be stated that there are different perspectives of viewing the electoral process, either from a group, game or power perspective among others. It must however be stated that of significance perspective is the elite theory especially as it performs unfolding the scheming, maneuvering and political machinations of the elites in the process for the acquisition and manifestation of political power. The elite theory as popularized by Vilfredo, Pareto, Gaetano Mosca, Wright Mills among others (Varma, 1975), no doubt vividly explains the Nigerian electoral cum political system considering the fact that most political parties that exist in the present democratic dispensation could either be classified as cadre or elite parties which manipulates the sentiments of the masses for the selfish objective of acquiring economic base.

These manipulative devices of the masses by the political elites according to the elite theorists exist because the elites are better organized and possess class consciousness when compared to the masses (Robert, 1976). In the Nigerian State, the manipulative process is a complex one that threatens the survival of the polity not only because of the contradiction of interests amongst the elites as a result of hedonistic manifestations, but also because the political elites tend to manipulate ethno-religious sentiments as tools for the acquisition of political support.

It is however important to emphasize that from a very broad perspective, there are different types of elites: political elites, bureaucratic elites, religious elites, military elites, traditional elites, etc. It is also important to state that elitist classifications are not mutually exclusive in the sense that just as elite can fall within more than a classification, such classification also varies from time to time. For instance, the military elite during a military regime could also be classified as a political elite, especially when he is involve in the authoritative allocation of State resources. And after a transition to civil governance, the military elite when retired could be elected a traditional ruler and thus becoming traditional elite.

The implication of the above is that since elitist classifications are not mutually exclusive, it does mean that the political elites could easily depend on other elitist class for the manipulation of support for power acquisition. This is quite visible in the Nigeria in the form of say traditional rulers influencing support for political candidates or bureaucratic elites in the civil service influencing the electoral process in order to keep their jobs. The above no doubt explain for the nature of party politics vis-à-vis elections in Nigeria.

## **Elitism and Elections in Nigeria**

In order to enhance democratic survival in the Nigerian Fourth Republic, it is important to discern the hyphen and buckle that exists between elitism, partyism and elections in Nigeria. This is quite indispensable in that the structure of political parties especially in a competitive party democracy defines the nature of elections that would be obtainable in a state. This paper therefore discusses three typologies:

1. In a situation where political parties even when elitist formed is people centred in that the support base resides in the people elections in such a system to a great extent would be free and fair. A typical example is the June 12 presidential elections in which the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Republic Convention (NRC) through an elitist created political parties by the military, their support however rested on the people based on the Option A4 political representation system.
2. In a situation where parties are elitist formed and in which the support base resides in the elites rather than the people, intra and inter party elections in such a system to a great extent would not be free and fair. This could be said to be compatible with the Nigerian Fourth Republic. For instance, the G.34 group metamorphosized into the formation of the People's Democratic Party (PDP) and the manner in which party Executives and flag bearers in elections does emerged is an indication of elitist imposition of which the resultant effect has been elitist contradiction leading to the formations of new political parties by marginalized elites E.g. Atiku Abubakar, Orji Uzor Kalu leaving the P.D.P. to form Action Congress (AC) and the Progressive People's Alliance (PPA).
3. In a situation where you have a mixture of both, that is parties whose support base resides in the people and others whose support base resides in the elites, there is the tendency for the domination of the masses based political party by the elite based political party. For instance, the domination of Aminu Kano's People's Redemption Party (PRP) by the elitist National Party of Nigeria (NPN) during the Second Republic in Nigeria.

## **Elections and Democracy**

Although there are different conceptions of democracy (Janda, et al 1997; Ntalaja, 2003; Massoud, 2000) however the democratization processes that took place in most African states in the 1990's were geared towards the western liberal democracy which emphasizes the following:

- (a) Competitive party politics through constitutionally recognized opposition.
- (b) Entrenched fundamental human rights through which the citizens could exercise political participation in the political system.
- (c) The existence and adherence to the principle of rule of law that must guide functional conflicts as regards the processes for power acquisition.
- (d) Independent electoral body that should be free from the maneuvering and influence of governmental officials and must be viewed as credible by competing parties.
- (e) The principle of political equality which respects the notion of one man, one vote and where the votes of the electorate count.
- (f) The notion of free and fair election, where electorate not intimidated nor insecure in participating in elections.

In Nigeria, just like most of the countries in Africa, elections especially its freeness and fairness constitute the central factor in ensuring democratic survival. This is because the lack of free and fair elections often tends to threaten the democratic process as a result of legitimacy question. Thus factor no doubt has characterized the democratic experiment of the Nigerian Fourth Republic in that there have been persistent crisis of legitimacy in governance arising from poor electoral system (Omodia, 2008).

In other words, while elections could not be said to be synonymous with the democratic process in that democracy encompasses other attributes, but elections are so central to the operation and survival of democracy in that it defines the level of freedom exercised by the people in decoding who represent them in government. It also serves as an index of noticing whether the electoral body and the judicial organ of the government are independent of the legislative and executive organ.

However, in the present democratic dispensation of the Nigerian Fourth Republic, events have shown that the electoral body is not independent of the party in power. This has been defined in relation to the manner of which the electoral body had conducted elections in a way that advantaged the party in power through poor planning, the device of excluding electorates from voting in places considered to be the strongholds of opposition, through the inadequate supply of voting materials, or late arrival of electoral officers to polling stations (Abdullahi, 2008).

In addition, there have been cases in which candidate that won electoral primaries were replaced by candidates that either never contested or by candidates that were defeated during the exercise which was observed by the electoral body. As regard this aspect, the case of Rotimi Amaechi that was substituted by Celestine Omehia for the PDP 2007 Gubernatorial election in Rivers State comes to mind among many others. Moreover, the scenario in which flag bearers of political parties either in the Presidential or Gubernatorial elections were disqualified from contesting elections few days to the conduct of elections for no genuine reason by the electoral body as observed in the 2007 general elections was an indication that the electoral body was not truly independent of government as those decisions served the interest of the party in power.

As regard the judiciary under the present democratic dispensation, unlike what was obtainable in the aborted Third Republic where the Judiciary served as a tool for creating political topsy-turvy that undermined the democratic process, the judiciary in the present dispensation could be said to be a major improvement from what was obtainable in the past. While in some cases the judiciary has served as a tool for upholding democratic decisions with such cases as the judicial pronouncement of Peter Obi of All Progressive Grand Alliance (APGA) as the duly elected Governor of Anambra State rather than Dr. Chris Ngige of PDP, and the further judgment that the tenure of the administration would end in 2010 rather than 2007. This is coupled with several judicial judgments that led to the re-run of elections in States like Kogi, Adamawa, Sokoto among others.

Conversely, it must however be stated that in the cases of re-run elections such elections became cosmetical as the party in power utilized government machinery to the advantage of its candidate. In addition, there were cases in which adjudication were said to be based on political considerations. For instance, political consideration played a major part in the case between Alhaji Muhammadu Buhari of ANPP and Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the PDP as a result of the fall out of the 2003 Presidential elections in which the case was decided in favour of the PDP Presidential Candidate by the Nigerian Supreme Court (Isa and Zakari, 2008).

The implication of the above therefore is that elections are so central to the practice of democracy, and the degree of elitist manipulations for the purpose of power acquisition vis-à-vis the degree of system capability in terms of symbolic, regulation and distribution capabilities for political support to a great extent constitute the basis through which State's democracy could be classified.

## **The Way Forward**

In order to enhance democratic survival in the present democratic dispensation through free and fair elections, two basic propelling factors has been suggested:

1. Since the present political scenario in Nigeria is such that political parties because of their lack of focus on the masses has not been able to effectively perform the functions of political socialization, interest articulation, interest aggregation and political communication. Thus, in order for the Nigerian electorate to have optimum utilization of their political power, there is need for government to place utmost priority on education by ensuring free and compulsory education up to Senior Secondary level for all qualified Nigerians. It is believed that by so doing the Nigerian electorate would be in a position to demand for their rights, exercise their votes wisely and also defend the votes.
2. The establishment of an Electoral Crime Commission that will serve as a watchdog of the electoral commission, the political parties and contesting candidates in ensuring that political campaigns and elections are conducted according to the rules of the game. The Electoral Crime Commission should also be charged with the powers to prosecute those caught in the act of electoral violence, thuggery, snatching of ballot boxes and other electoral ills in the Court of law.

## **Conclusion**

The problem of putting “self” before the Nigerian State no doubt has negatively impacted on the Nigerian electoral system. Thus problem of self snowballing into elitist contradiction especially in the Nigerian Fourth Republic is not farfetched from the fear of the unknown because of poor governance by political leaders in the last eight years. As a result, the electoral process is often manipulated to serve as security for the fear of the unknown by not allowing a free and fair electoral process. However, the position of this paper is that a transparent electoral system is a tool for good governance that will serve as a better security for political leadership rather than the lost of integrity and credibility arising from a manipulated process.

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